



The French Indochina War Begins, 1946-1950



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Viet Minh guerrillas listen to Vo Nguyen Giap.



2. U.S. Neutrality in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1946-1949

a. Failures of Negotiated Settlement

The return of the French to Tonkin in March, 1946, created an explosive situation. North Vietnam, a traditionally rice-deficit area, had experienced an extraordinarily bad harvest in 1945. Severe famine was scarcely helped by the concentration of armies in the Red River Delta -- Vietnamese irregular forces, the most numerous belonging to the Viet Minh; some 150,000 Chinese; and then the French Expeditionary Corps. The people were not only hungry, but politically restive; the popular appetite for national independence had been thoroughly whetted by the Viet Minh and the formation of the DRV. While feeling against all foreign occupiers ran high, the French remained the primary target of enmity. But the March 6 Accord deferred a reckoning, serving to mollify extremists in Tonkin, and to dampen guerrilla operations in South Vietnam. The accord in any event underwrote peaceful cooperation between France and the DRV in North Vietnam for eight months.

Yet the March 6 accord constituted an admission of defeat for Ho Chi Minh, because his policy had been directed toward internationalizing the Indochina problem. Ho made repeated overtures to the United States, to the United Nations, and to China, the USSR, and the U.K. ^{36/} His letters presented eloquent appeals for U.S. or U.N. intervention in Vietnam on the grounds of the principles embodied in the Atlantic Charter, the U.N. Charter, and on humanitarian grounds. The last such to be forwarded to the U.S. prior to the Accord of 6 March 1946, is summarized in the following telegram from an American diplomat in Hanoi, received in Washington 27 February 1946:

"Ho Chi Minh handed me 2 letters addressed to President of USA, China, Russia, and Britain identical copies of which were stated to have been forwarded to other governments named. In 2 letters to Ho Chi Minh request [sic] USA as one of United Nations to support idea of Annamese independence according to Philippines [sic] example, to examine the case of the Annamese,

Viet Minh troops listen to Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, September 1945



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Viet Minh guerrillas make booby traps



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and to take steps necessary to maintenance of world peace which is being endangered by French efforts to reconquer Indochina. He asserts that Annamese will fight until United Nations interfere in support of Annamese independence. The petition addressed to major United Nations contains:

"A. Review of French relations with Japanese where French Indochina allegedly aided Japs:

"B. Statement of establishment on 2 September 1945 of PENW [sic] Democratic Republic of Viet Minh:

"C. Summary of French conquest of Cochin China begun 23 Sept 1945 and still incomplete:

"D. Outline of accomplishments of Annamese Government in Tonkin including popular elections, abolition of undesirable taxes, expansion of education and resumption as far as possible of normal economic activities:

"E. Request to 4 powers: (1) To intervene and stop the war in Indochina in order to mediate fair settlement and (2) to bring the Indochinese issue before the United Nations organization. The petition ends with statement that Annamese ask for full independence in fact and that in interim while awaiting UNO decision the Annamese will continue to fight the reestablishment of French imperialism. Letters and petition will be transmitted to Department soonest." ^{37/}

There is no record that the U.S. encouraged Ho Chi Minh thus to submit his cause to the U.S., beyond the O.S.S. support he received during and immediately after World War II; nor does the record reflect that the U.S. responded affirmatively to Ho's petitions. Rather, the U.S. Government appears to have adhered uniformly to a policy of looking to the French rather than to Vietnamese Nationalists for constructive steps toward Vietnamese independence. On 5 December, 1946, after the November incidents, but before the fighting broke out in earnest, State instructed the U.S. diplomatic representative in Hanoi as follows: ^{38/}

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.



Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.

"Assume you will see Ho in Hanoi and offer following summary our present thinking as guide.

"Keep in mind Ho's clear record as agent international communism, absence evidence recantation Moscow affiliations, confused political situation France and support Ho receiving French Communist Party. Least desirable eventuality would be establishment Communist-dominated Moscow-oriented state Indochina in view DEPT, which most interested INFO strength non-communist elements Vietnam. Report fully, repeating or requesting DEPT repeat Paris.

"Recent occurrences Tonkin cause deep concern. Consider March 6 accord and modus vivendi as result peaceful negotiation provide basis settlement outstanding questions between France and Vietnam and impose responsibility both sides not prejudice future, particularly forthcoming Fontainebleau Conference, by resort force. Unsettled situation such as pertains certain to offer provocations both sides, but for this reason conciliatory patient attitude especially necessary. Intransigence either side and disposition exploit incidents can only retard economic rehabilitation Indochina and cause indefinite postponement conditions cooperation France and Vietnam which both agree essential.

"If Ho takes stand non-implementation promise by French of Cochinchina referendum relieves Vietnam responsibility compliance with agreements, you might if you consider advisable raise question whether he believes referendum after such long disorder could produce worthwhile result and whether he considers compromise on status Cochinchina could possibly be reached through negotiation.

"May say American people have welcomed attainments Indochinese in efforts realize praiseworthy aspirations greater autonomy in framework democratic institutions and it would be regrettable should this interest and sympathy be imperilled by any tendency Vietnam administration force issues by intransigence and violence.

"May inform Ho [U.S. Ambassador Paris] discussing situation French similar frankness. For your INFO, [Foreign Office] in DEC 3 conversation stated (1) no question reconquest Indochina as such would be counter French public opinion and probably beyond French military resources, (2) French will continue base policy March 6 accord and modus vivendi and make every effort apply them through negotiation Vietnam, (3) French would resort forceful measures only on restricted scale in case flagrant violation agreements Vietnam, (4) d'Argenlieu's usefulness impaired by outspoken dislike Vietnam officials and

replacement perhaps desirable, (5) French Communists embarrassed in pose as guardian French international interests by barrage telegraphic appeals from Vietnam. [Ambassador] will express gratification this statement French policy with observation implementation such policy should go far obviate any danger that (1) Vietnamese irreconcilables and extremists might be in position make capital of situation (2) Vietnamese might be turned irrevocably against West and toward ideologies and affiliations hostile democracies which could result perpetual foment Indochina with consequences all Southeast Asia.

"Avoid impression US Govt making formal intervention this juncture. Publicity any kind would be unfortunate.

"Paris be guided foregoing.

"Acheson, Acting."

For a while, the French seemed genuinely interested in pursuing a policy based on the March 6 Accord and the modus vivendi, and in avoiding a test of arms with the DRV. If there were contrary utterances from some, such as Admiral d'Argenlieu, the High Commissioner of Indochina, -- who recorded his "amazement that France has such a fine expeditionary corps in Indochina and yet its leaders prefer to negotiate rather than to fight...." -- there were many such as General Leclerc, who had led French forces into Hanoi on 18 March 1946, and promptly called on Ho Chi Minh, announcing every intention of honoring the March 6 Accord. "At the present time," he said, "there is no question of imposing ourselves by force on masses who desire evolution and innovation." 39/ The French Socialist Party -- the dominant political party in France -- consistently advocated conciliation during 1946. In December, 1946, even after the armed incidents in November between French and DRV armed forces in North Vietnam, Leon Blum -- who had become Premier of France, at the head of an all-Socialist Cabinet -- wrote that France had no alternative save to grant the Vietnamese independence:

"There is one way and only one of preserving in Indochina the prestige of our civilization, our political and spiritual influence, and also those of our material interests which are legitimate: it is sincere agreement [with Viet Nam] on the basis of independence...." 40/

The Communists, the other major Leftist party in France, were also vocally conciliatory; but, expectant of controlling the government, if not alone at least as part of a coalition, they tended to be more careful than the Socialists of their ability to sway nationalist sentiment. In July of 1946, L'Humanité, the Communist newspaper, had emphasized that the Party



b. U.S. Policy Toward the Conflict, 1947-1949

The U.S. manifested increasing concern over the conflict in Indochina, but through 1949 American policy continued to regard the war as fundamentally a matter for French resolution. It is clear on the record that American policy-makers of the day perceived the vacuity of French policies in 1946 and 1947. The U.S., in its representations to France, consistently deplored the prospect of protracted war in Vietnam, and urged meaningful concessions to Vietnamese nationalism. However, the U.S. always stopped short of endorsing Ho Chi Minh, deterred by Ho's history of communist affiliation. Accordingly, U.S. policy gravitated with that of France toward the Bao Dai solution. At no point was the U.S. prepared to adopt an openly interventionist course. To have done so would have clashed with the expressed British view that Indochina was an exclusively French concern, and played into the hands of France's extremist political parties of both the Right and the Left. The U.S. was particularly apprehensive lest by intervening it strengthen the political position of French Communists. Moreover, in 1946 and 1947, France and Britain were moving toward an anti-Soviet alliance in Europe, and the U.S. was reluctant to press a potentially divisive policy. Compared with European recovery, and escape from communist domination, the U.S. considered the fate of Vietnamese nationalism relatively insignificant. Further, the dispute in 1946 and 1945 over the Dutch possession in Indonesia had furnished a precedent: there the U.S. had moved cautiously, and only after long delays, to internationalize the conflict. Extensive American and British investments in Indonesia, moreover, afforded common ground for intervention. No similar rationale or commonality existed for intervention in Indochina, since Indochina was almost exclusively a French economic preserve, and a political morass which the U.K. was manifestly interested in avoiding.

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.

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French marines wade ashore near Da Nang

The resultant U.S. policy has most often been termed "neutrality." It was, however, also consistent with the policy of deferring to French volition announced by President Roosevelt's Secretary of State on 3 April 1945. It was a policy characterized by the same indecision that had marked U.S. wartime policy. It was, moreover, a policy formulated with an undertone of indifference: at the time, Indochina appeared to be one region in which the U.S. might enjoy the luxury of abstention.

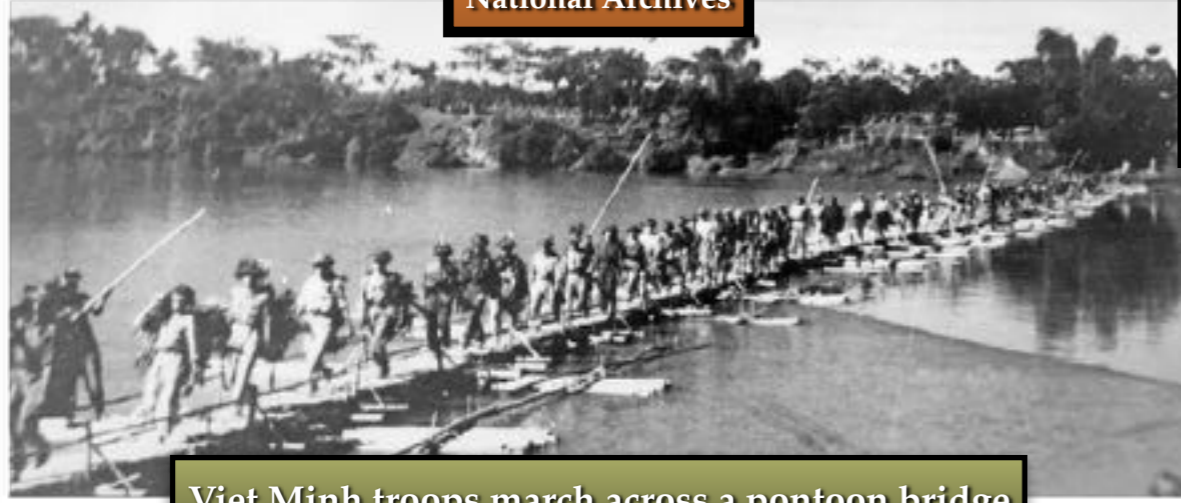
When open warfare broke out between the DRV and France in December, 1946, John Carter Vincent, Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs, in a memorandum to Under Secretary Acheson of 23 December 1946, recommended that the latter call in the French Ambassador to highlight inherent dangers. The memorandum included this acute analysis:

"Although the French in Indochina have made far-reaching paper-concessions to the Vietnamese desire for autonomy, French actions on the scene have been directed toward whittling down the powers and the territorial extent of the Vietnam 'free state.' This process the Vietnamese have continued to resist. At the same time, the French themselves admit that they lack the military strength to reconquer the country. In brief, with inadequate forces, with public opinion sharply at odds, with a government rendered largely ineffective through internal division, the French have tried to accomplish in Indochina what a strong and united Britain has found it unwise to attempt in Burma. Given the present elements in the situation, guerrilla warfare may continue indefinitely."

Secretary Acheson acted on Mr. Vincent's suggestion, and expressed to the Ambassador views summarized as follows:

"We had anticipated such a situation developing in November and events have confirmed our fears. While we have no wish to

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Viet Minh troops march across a pontoon bridge



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offer to mediate under present conditions we do want the French GOVT to know that we are ready and willing to do anything which it might consider helpful in the circumstances. We have been gratified to learn of Moutet's mission and have confidence in his moderation and broad viewpoint. We believe however that the situation is highly inflammatory and if present unsettled conditions continue, there is a possibility that other powers might attempt to bring the matter up before the Security Council. If this happens, as in the case of Indonesia, the question will arise whether the matter is one of purely French internal concern or a situation likely to disturb the peace. Other powers might likewise attempt some form of intervention as has been suggested in the Chinese press. We would be opposed to such steps, but from every point of view it seems important that the question be settled as soon as possible. Mr. Acheson added that he wondered whether the French would attempt to reconquer the country through military force which was a step that the British had found unwise to attempt in Burma." 58/

On 8 January, 1947, the Department of State instructed the American Ambassador in Paris that the U.S. would approve sale of arms and armaments to France "except in cases which appear to relate to Indochina." 59/ On the same date, 8 January 1947, the French conveyed to the Department of State a message that:

"...the French Government appreciated the understanding attitude that Mr. Acheson had shown in discussing the problem of Indochina; that it had taken note of Mr. Acheson's offer of 'good offices' and appreciated the spirit in which the offer was made; and that the French Government did not feel that it could avail itself of our offer but must continue to handle the situation single-handedly along the lines stated by Moutet. [The emissary] went on to say that the principal objective of the French military was to restore order and reopen communications. He said that after this was done the French Government would be prepared to discuss matters with the Vietnamese. He said that the French Government had every intention of living up to the agreement of last March 6 and the modus vivendi of September 15, once order was restored. [He was] asked...whether he thought the French military could restore order within any foreseeable future time. He seemed to think, without much evidence of conviction, that they could." 60/

There then ensued an interesting exchange between the U.S. official and the French representative in which the Frenchman sketched a claim of American culpability for the war:

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.



French paratroopers on a patrol

"To date the Vietnam press and radio have not adopted an anti-American position. It is rather the French colonial press that has been strongly anti-American and has freely accused the U.S. of imperialism in Indochina to the point of approximating the official Moscow position. Although the Vietnam radio has been closely watched for a new position toward the U.S., no change has appeared so far. Nor does there seem to have been any split within the coalition government of Vietnam....

"Evaluation. If there is a Moscow-directed conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly so far. Possible explanations are:

1. No rigid directives have been issued by Moscow.
2. The Vietnam government considers that it has no rightist elements that must be purged.
3. The Vietnam Communists are not subservient to the foreign policies pursued by Moscow.
4. A special dispensation for the Vietnam government has been arranged in Moscow.

Of these possibilities, the first and fourth seem most likely." 71/



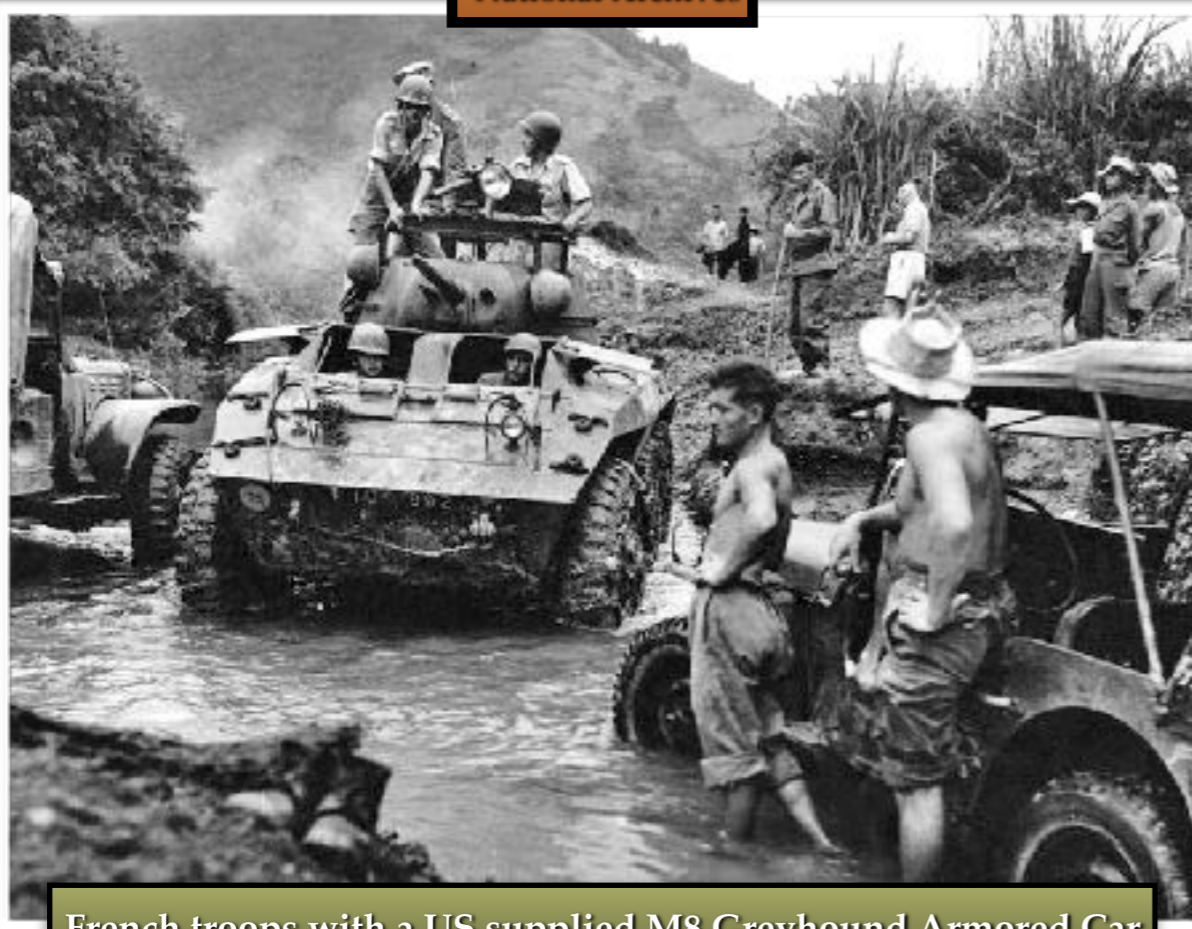
3. Origins of the U.S. Involvement in Vietnam

a. The Policy Context

Events in China of 1948 and 1949 brought the United States to a new awareness of the vigor of communism in Asia, and to a sense of urgency over its containment. U.S. policy instruments developed to meet unequivocal communist challenges in Europe were applied to the problem of the Far East. Concurrent with the development of NATO, a U.S. search began for collective security in Asia; economic and military assistance programs were inaugurated; and the Truman Doctrine acquired wholly new dimensions by extension into regions where the European empires were being dismantled. In March, 1947, President Truman had set forth the following policy guidelines:

"I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

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French troops with a US supplied M8 Greyhound Armored Car

I believe we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way...." 72/

The President went on to underscore the U.S. determination to commit its resources to contain communism. While he clearly subordinated military aid to economic and political means, he did assert the U.S. intent to assist in maintaining security:

"To insure the peaceful development of nations, free from coercion, the United States has taken a leading part in establishing the United Nations. The United Nations is designed to make possible freedom and independence for all its members. We shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes." 73/

In the year 1947, while U.S. military assistance began to flow into Greece to ward off subversive aggression, the U.S. inaugurated the European Recovery Plan (ERP). ERP was aimed at economic recovery in Western Europe, especially in countries such as France and Italy where post-war depression was fostering marked leftward political trends. In one of the high level appraisals of the situation that the U.S. had to counter in 1947, the Harriman Committee on Foreign Aid has concluded that:

"The interest of the United States in Europe...cannot be measured simply in economic terms. It is also strategic and political. We all know that we are faced in the world today with two conflicting ideologies....Our position in the world has been based for at least a century on the existence in Europe of a number of strong states committed by tradition and inclination to the democratic concept...." 74/

The fall of the Czechoslovakian Government in February 1948 brought about the Brussels Pact, a Western European collective defense and economic collaboration arrangement. The blockade of Berlin, which began on 1 April 1948, accelerated U.S. movement toward membership in the alliance. On June 11, 1948 the U.S. Senate adopted a resolution advising the Executive to undertake the:

"...Progressive development of regional and other collective arrangements for individual and collective self-defense in accordance with the purposes, principles, and provisions of the Charter [of the UN], association of

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.



the United States, by constitutional process, with such regional and other collective arrangements as are based on continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, and as affect its national security." 75/

That same month, Congress passed the Economic Cooperation Act, and in July, 1948, opened negotiations for a North Atlantic Alliance. The North Atlantic Treaty was signed in April, 1949, and entered into force in August of that year.

In the same omnibus foreign assistance legislation which had authorized ECA in June, 1948, Congress had provided for a China Aid Program. This measure met almost immediate failure, for Mao's armies spread unchecked over the China mainland, and by mid-1949 the position of the nationalists there was untenable. The "failure" of U.S. aid -- which was termed such by Congressional critics -- no less than the urgent situation in Europe and the exploding of the first Soviet nuclear device in September, 1949, figured in Congressional action on military assistance legislation. 76/

On October 6, 1949, Congress passed the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP) through which U.S. arms, military equipment and training assistance might be provided world-wide for collective defense. In the first appropriations under MDAP, NATO countries received 76% of the total, and Greece and Turkey (not yet NATO members), 16%. 77/ But Korea and the Philippines received modest aid, and the legislators clearly intended the law to underwrite subsequent appropriations for collective security in Asia. The opening paragraph of the law not only supported NATO, but foreshadowed the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty:

"An Act to Promote the Foreign Policy and Provide for the Defense and General Welfare of the United States by Furnishing Military Assistance to Foreign Nations, Approved October 6, 1949.

"Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That this Act may be cited as the 'Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949.'

"FINDINGS AND DECLARATION OF POLICY

"The Congress of the United States reaffirms the policy of the United States to achieve international peace and security through the United Nations so that armed force shall not be

used except in the common interest. The Congress hereby finds that the efforts of the United States and other countries to promote peace and security in furtherance of the purposes of the Charter of the United Nations require additional measures of support based upon the principle of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid. These measures include the furnishing of military assistance essential to enable the United States and other nations dedicated to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter to participate effectively in arrangements for individual and collective self-defense in support of those purposes and principles. In furnishing such military assistance, it remains the policy of the United States to continue to exert maximum efforts to obtain agreements to provide the United Nations with armed forces as contemplated in the Charter and agreements to achieve universal control of weapons of mass destruction and universal regulation and reduction of armaments, including armed forces, under adequate safeguards to protect complying nations against violation and evasion.

"The Congress hereby expresses itself as favoring the creation by the free countries and the free peoples of the Far East of a joint organization, consistent with the Charter of the United Nations, to establish a program of self-help and mutual cooperation designed to develop their economic and social well-being, to safeguard basic rights and liberties and to protect their security and independence.

"The Congress recognizes that economic recovery is essential to international peace and security and must be given clear priority. The Congress also recognizes that the increased confidence of free peoples in their ability to resist direct or indirect aggression and to maintain internal security will advance such recovery and support political stability." 78/

While Congress was deliberating on MDAP, the staff of the National Security Council, at the request of the Secretary of Defense, had been reexamining U.S. policy toward Asia. In June, 1949, the Secretary had noted that he was:

"...increasingly concerned at the...advance of communism in large areas of the world and particularly the successes of communism in China...."

"A major objective of United States policy, as I understand it, is to contain communism in order to reduce its threat to our security. Our actions in Asia should be part of a carefully considered and comprehensive plan to further that objective." 79/

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.



"The current conflict between colonialism and native independence is the most important political factor in southeast Asia. This conflict results not only from the decay of European imperial power in the area but also from a widening political consciousness and the rise of militant nationalism among the subject peoples. With the exception of Thailand and the Philippines, the southeast Asia countries do not possess leaders practiced in the exercise of responsible power. The question of whether a colonial country is fit to govern itself, however, is not always relevant in practical politics. The real issue would seem to be whether the colonial country is able and determined to make continued foreign rule an overall losing proposition for the metropolitan power. If it is, independence for the colonial country is the only practical solution, even though misgovernment eventuates. A solution of the consequent problem of instability, if it arises, must be sought on a non-imperialist plane. In any event, colonial-nationalist conflict provides a fertile field for subversive communist activities, and it is now clear that southeast Asia is the target of a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin. In seeking to gain control of southeast Asia, the Kremlin is motivated in part by a desire to acquire southeast Asia's resources and communication lines, and to deny them to us. But the political gains which would accrue to the USSR from communist capture of southeast Asia are equally significant. The extension of communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us; if southeast Asia also is swept by communism we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East and in a then critically exposed Australia. The United States should continue to use its influence looking toward resolving the colonial nationalist conflict in such a way as to satisfy the fundamental demands of the nationalist-colonial conflict, lay the basis for political stability and resistance to communism, and avoid weakening the colonial powers who are our western allies. However, it must be remembered that the long colonial tradition in Asia has left the peoples of that area suspicious of Western influence. We must approach the problem from the Asiatic point of view in so far as possible and should refrain from taking the lead in movements which must of necessity be of Asian origin. It will therefore be to our interest wherever possible



to encourage the peoples of India, Pakistan, the Philippines and other Asian states to take the leadership in meeting the common problems of the area....

"It would be to the interest of the United States to make use of the skills, knowledge and long experience of our European friends and, to whatever extent may be possible, enlist their cooperation in measures designed to check the spread of USSR influence in Asia. If members of the British Commonwealth, particularly India, Pakistan, Australia and New Zealand, can be persuaded to join with the United Kingdom and the United States in carrying out constructive measures of economic, political and cultural cooperation, the results will certainly be in our interest. Not only will the United States be able thus to relieve itself of part of the burden, but the cooperation of the white nations of the Commonwealth will arrest any potential dangers of the growth of a white-colored polarization." 80/

On December 30, 1949, the National Security Council met with President Truman presiding, discussed the NSC staff study, and approved the following conclusions:

"As the basis for realization of its objectives, the United States should pursue a policy toward Asia containing the following components:

"a. The United States should make known its sympathy with the efforts of Asian leaders to form regional associations of non-Communist states of the various Asian areas, and if in due course associations eventuate, the United States should be prepared, if invited, to assist such associations to fulfill their purposes under conditions which would be to our interest. The following principles should guide our actions in this respect:

(1) Any association formed must be the result of a genuine desire on the part of the participating nations to cooperate for mutual benefit in solving the political, economic, social and cultural problems of the area.

(2) The United States must not take such an active part in the early stages of the formation of such an association that it will be subject to the charge of using the Asiatic nations to further United States ambitions.

(3) The association, if it is to be a constructive force, must operate on the basis of mutual aid and self-help in all fields so that a true partnership may exist based on equal rights and equal obligations.

(4) United States participation in any stage of the development of such an association should be with a view to accomplishing our basic objectives in Asia and to assuring that any

association formed will be in accord with Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations dealing with regional arrangements.

"b. The United States should act to develop and strengthen the security of the area from Communist external aggression or internal subversion. These steps should take into account any benefits to the security of Asia which may flow from the development of one or more regional groupings. The United States on its own initiative should now:

(1) Improve the United States position with respect to Japan, the Ryukyus and the Philippines.

(2) Scrutinize closely the development of threats from Communist aggression, direct or indirect, and be prepared to help within our means to meet such threats by providing political, economic, and military assistance and advice where clearly needed to supplement the resistance of the other governments in and out of the area which are more directly concerned.

(3) Develop cooperative measures through multi-lateral or bilateral arrangements to combat Communist internal subversion.

(4) Appraise the desirability and the means of developing in Asia some form of collective security arrangements, bearing in mind the following considerations:

(a) The reluctance of India at this time to join in any anti-Communist security pact and the influence this will have among the other nations of Asia.

(b) The necessity of assuming that any collective security arrangements which might be developed be based on the principle of mutual aid and on a demonstrated desire and ability to share in the burden by all the participating states.

(c) The necessity of assuring that any such security arrangements would be consonant with the purposes of any regional association which may be formed in accordance with paragraph 3-a above.

(d) The necessity of assuring that any such security arrangement would be in conformity with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter relating to individual and collective self-defense.

"c. The United States should encourage the creation of an atmosphere favorable to economic recovery and development in non-Communist Asia, and to the revival of trade along multi-lateral, non-discriminatory lines. The economic policies of the

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.



DISSIDENT ACTIVITIES IN INDOCHINA

(3 November 1950)



Areas in which Communist-led rebels are challenging government authority.



Areas in which Communist-instigated guerrilla attacks have recently occurred.



SOURCE: CIA, NIE-5
Map Supplement
5 January 1951

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.

United States should be adapted to promote, where possible, economic conditions that will contribute to political stability in friendly countries of Asia, but the United States should carefully avoid assuming responsibility for the economic welfare and development of that continent...."

* * *

"h. The United States should continue to use its influence in Asia toward resolving the colonial-nationalist conflict in such a way as to satisfy the fundamental demands of the nationalist movement while at the same time minimizing the strain on the colonial powers who are our Western allies. Particular attention should be given to the problem of French Indo-China and action should be taken to bring home to the French the urgency of removing the barriers to the obtaining by Bao Dai or other non-Communist nationalist leaders of the support of a substantial proportion of the Vietnamese...."

"i. Active consideration should be given to means by which all members of the British Commonwealth may be induced to play a more active role in collaboration with the United States in Asia. Similar collaboration should be obtained to the extent possible from other non-Communist nations having interests in Asia.

"j. Recognizing that the non-Communist governments of South Asia already constitute a bulwark against Communist expansion in Asia, the United States should exploit every opportunity to increase the present Western orientation of the area and to assist, within our capabilities, its governments in their efforts to meet the minimum aspirations of their people and to maintain internal security." 81/

Thus, in the closing months of 1949, the course of U.S. policy was set to block further communist expansion in Asia: by collective security if the Asians were forthcoming, by collaboration with major European allies and commonwealth nations, if possible, but bilaterally if necessary. On that policy course lay the Korean War of 1950-1953, the forming of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization of 1954, and the progressively deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

b. The U.S. Enters the War

On December 30, 1949, the French signed over ten separate implementing agreements relating to the transfer of internal administration in Vietnam to Bao Dai's State of Vietnam, in accordance with the Elysee Agreement of March 8, 1949. By January, 1950, Mao's legions had reached Vietnam's northern frontier, and North Vietnam was moving into the Sino-Soviet orbit. A Department of State telegram reviewed U.S. policy as of 20 January 1950:



Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.

"DEPT still hopeful Bao Dai will succeed in gaining increasing popular support at Ho's expense and our policy remains essentially the same; to encourage him and to urge FR toward further concessions.

"The start made by Bao Dai, the qualities exhibited by him, and his initial reception seem to have been better than we might have anticipated, even discounting optimism of FR sources. Transfer of power apparently well received. FR success in disarming and interning fleeing CHI Nationalists without serious intervention to the present by CHI COMMIES also encouraging.

"However, more recently, marked opposition has been encountered which demonstrates at least that Bao Dai's popular support has not yet widened. Increased Viet Minh MIL activity is disquieting. This CID be special effort by Ho, timed to coincide with transfer of power and the arrival of CHI COMMIES armies on frontier, and to precede Bangkok Conference, or CID be evidence of increasing strength reinforced by hopes of CHI COMMIE support, direct or indirect.

"DEPT has as yet no knowledge of negotiations between Ho and Mao groups although radio intercept of New China News Agency release of JAN 17 indicates that Ho has messaged the 'GOVTS of the world' that 'the GOVT of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is the only legal GOVT of the Vietnam people' and is 'ready to establish DIPL relations with any GOVT which WLD be willing to cooperate with her on the basis of equality and mutual respect of national sovereignty and territory so as to defend world peace and democracy. Ho's radio making similar professions....

"Nature and timing of recognition of Bao Dai now under consideration here and with other GOVTS...." 82/

First the Chinese Communists, and then the Soviets recognized the DRV. On 29 January 1950, the French National Assembly approved legislation granting autonomy to the State of Vietnam. On February 1, 1950, Secretary of State Acheson made the following public statement:

"The recognition by the Kremlin of Ho Chi Minh's communist movement in Indochina comes as a surprise. The Soviet acknowledgment of this movement should remove any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina.

"Although timed in an effort to cloud the transfer of sovereignty by France to the legal Governments of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, we have every reason to believe that those legal

governments will proceed in their development toward stable governments representing the true nationalist sentiments of more than 20 million peoples of Indochina.

"French action in transferring sovereignty to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia has been in process for some time. Following French ratification, which is expected within a few days, the way will be open for recognition of these legal governments by the countries of the world whose policies support the development of genuine national independence in former colonial areas. Ambassador Jessup has already expressed to Emperor Bao Dai our best wishes for prosperity and stability in Vietnam, and the hope that closer relationship will be established between Vietnam and the United States." 83/

Formal French ratification of Vietnamese independence was announced on 2 February 1950. President Truman approved U.S. recognition for Bao Dai the same date, and on 4 February, the American Consul General in Saigon was instructed to deliver the following message to Bao Dai:

"Your Imperial Majesty:

"I have Your Majesty's letter in which I am informed of the signing of the agreements of March 8, 1949 between Your Majesty, on behalf of Vietnam, and the President of the French Republic, on behalf of France. My Government has also been informed of the ratification on February 2, 1950 by the French Government of the agreements of March 8, 1949.

"Since these acts establish the Republic of Vietnam as an independent State within the French Union, I take this opportunity to congratulate Your Majesty and the people of Vietnam on this happy occasion.

"The Government of the United States of America is pleased to welcome the Republic of Vietnam into the community of peace-loving nations of the world and to extend diplomatic recognition to the Government of the Republic of Vietnam. I look forward to an early exchange of diplomatic representatives between our two countries...." 84/

Recognition of Bao Dai was followed swiftly by French requests for U.S. aid. On May 8, 1950, Secretary of State Acheson released the following statement in Paris:

"The French Foreign Minister and I have just had an exchange of views on the situation in Indochina and are in general agreement both as to the urgency of the situation in that area and as to the necessity for remedial action. We have noted the



fact that the problem of meeting the threat to the security of Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos which now enjoy independence within the French Union is primarily the responsibility of France and the Governments and peoples of Indochina. The United States recognizes that the solution of the Indochina problem depends both upon the restoration of security and upon the development of genuine nationalism and that United States assistance can and should contribute to these major objectives.

"The United States Government, convinced that neither national independence nor democratic evolution exist in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism, considers the situation to be such as to warrant its according economic aid and military equipment to the Associated States of Indochina and to France in order to assist them in restoring stability and permitting these states to pursue their peaceful and democratic development." 85/

On May 11, 1950, the Acting Secretary of State made the following statement:

"A special survey mission, headed by R. Allen Griffin, has just returned from Southeast Asia and reported on economic and technical assistance needed in that area. Its over-all recommendations for the area are modest and total in the neighborhood of \$60 million. The Department is working on plans to implement that program at once.

"Secretary Acheson on Monday in Paris cited the urgency of the situation applying in the associates states of Viet-Nam, Laos and Cambodia. The Department is working jointly with ECA to impelment the economic and technical assistance recommendations for Indochina as well as the other states of Southeast Asia and anticipates that this program will get underway in the immediate future.

"Military assistance for Southeast Asia is being worked out by the Department of Defense in cooperation with the Department of State, and the details will not be made public for security reasons.

"Military assistance needs will be met from the President's emergency fund of \$75 million provided under MDAP for the general area of China.

"Economic assistance needs will be met from the ECA China Aid funds, part of which both Houses of Congress have indicated will be made available for the general area of China. Final

legislative action is still pending on this authorization but is expected to be completed within the next week." 86/

The United States thereafter was directly involved in the developing tragedy in Vietnam.

Excerpt from "United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" Vol. 1.

National Archives



Viet Minh soldiers marching through the jungle